

Colf

During the last few decades, Netherlandish archaeologists have excavated several colf balls, colf clubs and colf club heads. Most of these findings have never been researched or published.

Some years ago, during excavations in the central square and during clearance of filled-in canals in the centre of the ancient town of Amersfoort, several wooden colf balls were found. The diameter of these colf balls varied from 4.5 centimetres to 7.2 centimetres. Two of these balls were made of elmwood.



Full-size picture of the elmwood colf ball, found in Amersfoort. The ball dates from around 1600. The diameter is 5.0 centimetres and the weight is 40 grams. – By courtesy of Archeologisch Centrum, Amersfoort, The Netherlands



Bird's eye view of the ancient town of Amersfoort in the 17th century. Some wooden colf balls probably from between the 14th and 16th centuries were found during excavations in the central square, 'De Hof', right in the middle of the map. – Map from 'Toonneel der Steden', Joan Blaeu, Amsterdam, 1652 – <http://odur.let.rug.nl/~maps/images/blaeu/amfoort.jpg>

From the other balls the type of wood could not be established; neither could the age of the balls be determined, but based on other findings in these excavations these balls could be dated between the 14th and the 16th centuries.

Also in the centre of Amsterdam, a wooden colf ball was excavated during the demolition of a bakery. This bakery was built in the years 1589 and 1590. Colf players probably lost the colf ball while playing in the streets when this bakery was built. The ball was made of elmwood and had a diameter of 5.0 centimetres and the original weight must have been approximately 40 grams. (Steven J.H. van Hengel, 'Early Golf', 1982)

Some years ago, a wooden ball was found in the moat of Slot (castle) Loevestein in the centre of the Netherlands. The ball had been rubbed with linseed oil to preserve the wood.

Full-size picture of the elmwood colf ball, found in 1969 in Amsterdam during the demolition of a bakery built in 1589-1590. At that time the ball was probably lost during play. The diameter of the ball is 5.0 centimetres and the weight is 40 grams. – Private collection



Full-size picture of the wooden colf ball, found near the bank of the moat around Slot Loevestein, a castle in the centre of the Netherlands. The ball has a diameter of 7.0 centimetres and was treated with linseed oil to preserve the wood. The ball dates from the 17th century. – Museum Slot Loevestein, Poederoyen, The Netherlands



The diameter of the colf ball is 7.0 centimetres, but the type of wood could not be established. The ball dates probably from the 17th century.

All these excavated wooden balls do not show any remains of cuts, lines or dimples made at that time to improve the flight characteristics of the balls.

Both in the Northern and the Southern Netherlands (what is now Belgium), colf was played with wooden balls. Steven van Hengel, in his 'Early Golf', refers to an Antwerp ordinance from 1642 in which wooden balls were mentioned (Gemeentearchief Antwerpen, Gebodboek G. fol. 22, 147vso, 235, 238;1627-1643; Inv. Nr. Pk 920).

The dates of the different finds tell us that colvers knocked wooden balls around in the streets and churchyards and in the fields outside the city walls over a period of at least 350 years. Excavations of a leather ball (Amersfoort, 16th century), references in poems ('Poësy', Joannes Six van Chandelier, 1657) and many paintings of the 16th and 17th centuries show that at the same time leather balls, filled with hair, straw and sometimes feathers were used.



Detail of one of the 'Winter Landscape' paintings by Hendrick Avercamp. Several of such paintings from the early 17th century show that colvers were also, or mainly, using white coloured (sheepskin) leather balls on the ice, filled with hair or feathers.

The performance of wooden colf balls

Information about the playing characteristics of wooden colf balls is very limited. It is said that wooden balls will easily break into pieces when hit against walls and that they deform when in water during longer periods of time. The wooden balls excavated, of which the type of wood could still be detected by xylogists, were made of elmwood. Elmwood, when submerged for a period of time, will lose its sugars and become very hardwearing, so an elmwood ball was an excellent ball for use in the humid winter climate.

Wooden balls in general are not resilient and this has a negative effect on the distances that can be achieved.

Experiments with replicas of medieval colf clubs and balls showed that it was difficult to hit the wooden balls in a straight line. Colf players were probably not aware of the fact that smooth balls were very difficult to control and that balls with cut marks, lines, groves or dimples would significantly improve distance and flight trajectories.

It is possible that the bad characteristics of the smooth wooden ball were the main reasons that colf was expelled from the towns because windows of houses and churches were sometimes smashed and spectators and passers-by were easily hurt by the uncontrolled flight.

In an article ‘Van allen Spele’ (About all Games) in the Netherlandish ‘Madoc’, a magazine on the Middle Ages, 1996, Annemarieke Willemsen stated that with the lead-headed colf clubs and with sophisticated cleeks, good players could probably hit the relatively heavy wooden ball approximately 100 metres.

We assume that with the bent wooden clubs used by the end of the Middle Ages, players could not hit the ball any further than 50 to 75 metres.